Fire of Youth -- by Henry James Forman

Synopsis of Preceding Chapters.

ANTHONY WEST and his friend Joe Shelburn, both Harvard seniors, come to New York to spend the holidays. Eluding Joe and his sporty companions, Anthony takes Grace Thomas, a pretty telephone girl, whom he has met at the hotel, out to dinner. Later he escorts her to her home, where he passes a delirious hour with her arms about his neck and her kisses on his lips. The next morning Anthony is awakened by a telegram calling him home because of his mother's serious illness.

CHAPTER IV.

"ALBUQUERQUE."

THE name of Anthony West had been, in the familiar phrase, one to conjure with, not only in Little Rapids, but throughout the entire State of Nebraska, and even beyond the borders. Few citizens in the State had been more distinguished and none more beloved than the editor and founder of the Beacon. Yet he had never held public office higher than membership on the school board and never consciously sought the favor of any, unless candor and kindness and good humor were devices for securing it. He might have made the large salary of a metropolitan newspaper editor, but nothing could ever tempt him from the Beacon, its baby circulation and its small income.

To be born to an inheritance like that was no mean advantage, had Anthony the younger but known it. But the prevailing modesty of the home atmosphere was too clear for even a touch of the incense of superiority to taint it. There was no one above or beneath the Wests.

"Here is a man fit to stand before kings," a fervent school teacher once said of him before the Women's Club to whom she was "introducing" him.

"Yes, or sit down, as the case might be," was his mild response and also the opening of his address. "I do that every day in my dealings with the citizens of Little Rapids." And he was speaking the literal truth.

"I cannot and would not leave my son any money when I die," he was wont to say, "but shall leave him an honest American bringing up in an honest American town. If he can't make his way on that, no other inheritance will help him."

He had come to Little Rapids from Ohio, whither his father in his turn had come from Massachusetts, and, as the Nebraska town grew and developed shade trees and a country club, Anthony West and the Beacon also prospered, "but nothing to worry the Grand Jury," as he put it.

"A man's prosperity," he declared on one occasion, when a quickly-enriched fellow townsman was facing trial, "should be like a coral reef. If it's any faster than that, the chances are he's using human bones as a fertilizer."

"Son," he would remark to little Anthony, who loved the twinkle in his father's eyes and the crinkly smile around them, "son, if you want to be rich and also innocent, you've got to strike oil on your own property by accident, while drilling for water. But you've got to drill for something."

Annie West, his wife, was of precisely his way of thinking and she idealized her husband. She had come to the office of the newly lighted Beacon, an eager graduate from the State University, as a proof reader and the cord that vibrated between them from the very first soon drew them together into the happiest marriage in Little Rapids. Her one dread, at first, was lest he should be tempted into the big city, away from the seat of their happiness. Her husband's laughing philosophy however was:

'If I'm good enough so they want me to leave here, then I'm too good to think of leaving."

No one could have fitted better into the office of the Beacon than Jim Howard, assistant editor, news editor, superintendent and general factotum. Anthony west would have had to go far to find such a coworker, had he thought of seeking one. But Jim was the sort you do not seek, but find. As a matter of strict fact, it was Jim who came to find West.

He had been a tramp printer, who, like many of his kind, had fallen into the morass of drink—in a bone-dry State. Gifted though he was originally, he had fallen, owing to his weakness, into a state of utter poverty, neglect and wretchedness and lived in an almost constant state of inebriation. Being, strangely enough, of a scrupulous honesty even in the midst of his debauches, he would appear at his place of employment with drink-sodden features, glazed eyes, often with only a red flannel shirt under his coat, and with a childishly vacant smile he would utter the single word, "Albuquerque."

Neither he nor any one else could tell the mysterious significance of that particular place-name. But its meaning for themselves all his employers learned very speedily. It was equivalent to "taboo." It was as though Jim was saying, "Steer clear of me to-day. I can't work. I am blind drunk and no earthly use to any one." But it also meant the truth, the bed-rock undisguised fact, no use or need of hiding anything between us.

"Albuquerque," he would repeat fatuously once or twice and then wander away and reappear only after a varying number of days, thin, pallid, cadaverous. But even with his trembling fingers he could set more ems of type in a given time than any of the sober printers. Men shook their heads pityingly behind his back.

"If only he could stay straight," they said to each other, but in the tone of one who should say, "If only January could turn into June, or the desert into a wheat field." No one ever expected Jim to straighten out without the help of a six-foot coffin.

But one day in Santa Fe, Jim came across a copy of the Beacon thrown out of a train window, and he read the editorials and then the entire paper from the first column to the last.

"That's the paper I'm going to work on," he told himself and that night he boarded a freight train in the general direction of Little Rapids. He was thrown off; he boarded another, he was arrested, but somehow, experienced tramp that he was, he made his way to Anthony West's office and asked for employment.

"This is the paper I want to work on," said Jim, after explaining how he came to find it. "I beat my way on the freights all the way from Santa Fe," he added, "so as to get here."

West was sufficiently experienced to appraise him at once and correctly, but there was something about the man that appealed to him strongly.

"Can you do job work?" he asked.

"I can do anything except,"—except keep away from the drink was what he was honestly going to say, but he stopped.

"Booze?" supplied Anthony West shrewdly. Jim nodded.

"This is a prohibition town," laughed West. Jim smiled faintly. "Oh, I know," proceeded West. "That's no bar—and no pun. But we'll take a chance. Maybe we could get rid of the habit—if we tried together, eh? What's your name?"

"Jim Howard."

"Well, let's take a chance, Jim, and see what we can do together if we try."

A light in the smouldering burnt-out eyes of the tramp, like a throb of gratitude, was his only comment on this. Aloud he said, "All right," and he was about to take his coat off. But he paused, remembering that he had only a red undershirt beneath it. Again West read his thoughts.

"Here's some money," he said cheerfully. "Our emporium is just round the corner to the right. They carry some pretty good blue shirts there. You can go to work at that case in there when you come back."

And so Jim Howard came to the Beacon. His struggle against rum henceforward became Anthony West's struggle. He sat up with him during his nights of horrors after his first debauch in Little Rapids, took him to an institution for the cure in Illinois, brought him back and established him in his own house for a period of months thereafter, and made of Jim an unshakable, devoted friend by befriending him.

"What you need, Jim, is what we all need," he told him, "friends, cheerful surroundings, good food and work that interests us. I'll see that you have all of those. From now on you're foreman of the composing room and you've got to help me with the paper."

Jim was cured. When little Anthony was a schoolboy, he remembered the word "Albuquerque" merely as a joke between Jim Howard and his father, and about the time Anthony was entering the High School, Jim, recently married, was moving into a little house he had bought in Boone street, only a block away from the West house, a much respected citizen of Little Rapids.

Early in his career as assistant editor of the Beacon, Jim established confidentially cordial relations with the son of his employer and rescuer.

"Ever read Kipling?" he asked the boy one day in the office.

"I've read the Jungle Book," Anthony answered glibly, "all about Bagheera and Kaa and the pack and Mowgli—gee, I wish I could swing that way from tree to tree."

"Yes," said Jim, "that's fine—that story of the beasts. But now you're going to the High School, you're old enough to read stories about men. You want to read a story called 'The Tomb of His Ancestors,' in a book called 'The Day's Work.' It's about the hill tribe of wild men in India called Bhils. A certain Englishman named John Chinn had bought them, ruled them and civilized them. He was their friend. He made the Bhil a man, they said. The story is all about their gratitude to that man's son, and grandson. A great man—Kipling. He understands the power of friendship, of gratitude, of the human heart generally.

"And your father, Anthony, did as much for me as Chinn did for the Bhil. He made me a man. This is a secret, my boy; you mustn't tell anybody. But I feel toward your dad and his son just as the wild Bhils felt toward the Chinn family. You see, I wasn't a man at all until I came to work for your dad. So if ever you need a friend, what you've got to do is to came straight to old Jim Howard and say 'Jim, I need you.' That'll be enough—see?"

Anthony laughed boyishly.

"Sure, I will, Jim. I know you're a friend to us—think I don't know?"

No one more than a boy appreciates the confidence of a grown man. And Anthony came to feel as though he had two fathers. He was always running to Jim with some secret and always confiding to him some marvelous idea. Now it was a scheme to get rich by pigeon-breeding, now a plan for converting a bicycle into a motorcycle. Always Jim was patient and sympathetic, but always he was waiting, waiting until the boy was old enough to turn his mind on more important things.

"The children would laugh uproariously and mother would appear in response to the noise and sentence would be carried out upon her to the tune of further young laughter."

CHAPTER V.

ADELA GRAY

THE brooding spirit of peace that overhangs the average town of the Central West never wholly dies from the hearts of its sons. In after life it appeared to Anthony as either a bleak and dull emptiness or as a sweet pastoral simplicity, depending on his mood. But that curiously colorless geometrical yet vital entity that was Little Rapids never quite faded from his memory, and those days of his boyhood, in any case, were halcyon days.

There was a fullness about them, an indescribable richness of occupation and detail that filled a boy's life with a delicious sequence of interest. There were rabbit-hutches to be made out of packing boxes, dovecotes for the squab farm in the shed, a bicycle to be perpetually oiled and tinkered with and, of course, the embroidery of school and lessons that served as a hem to the general garment of life.

And then there was Adela Gray. She was two years younger than Anthony, and such was her amazing genius (he could explain it only on the ground of genius) that she was his equal and contemporary in classes and usually his superior in the marks she received. Hers was not the robustious style of prettiness, of sheer young animal health, but the more appealing and interesting sort, of dark hair, pallor and large eyes and an extraordinary gift for reverence and admiration.

Anthony West, senior, master of the mysteries of the written and printed word, and a great and good man besides, was to Adela little short of a demigod. It was an apt illustration of woman's eternal adoration of learning, priestcraft and sanctity. And some of her admiration was even transferred to young Anthony.

She loved to be with him, to go to and from school with him, to run up the steps of an afternoon and consult him about the task in Latin, or in algebra, not only for the sake of seeing him but so she might also catch a glimpse of his father with his round pleasant face, his twinkling eye and his humorous smile.

"Where's mother?" the elder West would sometimes inquire upon entering the house with features composed to the sternness of a hanging judge. The boy and girl, possibly working together at their lessons in the living room, would laugh in anticipation. They knew that expression.

"She's in the kitchen, father," the boy would inform him.

"Go and get her, son," West would reply with unrelaxed severity. "Tell her there's a man here who wants to kiss her." And the children would laugh uproariously and mother would appear in response to the noise and sentence would be carried out upon her to the tune of further young laughter.

"I adore your father," Adela would afterwards whisper to Anthony, her great eyes shining with adoration.

"Great old dad," Anthony would say with masculine brevity and secret pride; but he loved Adela for her worship.

Mrs. West was so happy that sometimes she was sad to the point of tears. The tears came with the occasional forebodings that never wholly pass by the feminine heart, forebodings of the envy of the gods. She loved her husband, loved her only son, and the paramount object of her prayers was that their life should never change. In her best and happiest moments she was aware that to other families come storm and tempest and shipwreck, but she believed that somehow her little bark would be miraculously spared. At other times, notably when she was tired, the very serenity and gaiety of her household, the humor of her husband or some mark of brilliance in her son, would bring the unbidden tears to her eyes. If he happened to observe it, her husband would jocularly accuse her of being temperamental and sentimental—an accusation she accepted with misty laughter in her eyes. It was a charge she never refuted, for every good woman is to that extent both temperamental and sentimental—and unashamed.

Those middle years in the High School were so big and pregnant with the possibilities of life that young Anthony at times felt himself a veritable Monte Cristo. The question was at which point to take hold of the world that was so promisingly, so brilliantly his. He discussed matters with his chum, Arthur Clark, he discussed them even more intimately, because more easily, with Adela Gray. There was West Point, there was Annapolis, there was the State University at Lincoln, there were the Eastern colleges and the professions—an embarrassment, a profusion of riches. Adela's earnest eyes shone with interest.

"No, Anthony," she concluded decisively, "not Annapolis. I wouldn't be a sailor for anything, if I were you. You do see foreign countries, but you've got to be away from home weeks, years at a time—out on the ocean alone in storms—it must be terrible."

"Yes," he met her, "but look at the training you get—and on the water you get simply rotten with health! And the places you see—China, Gibraltar, Singapore—Yokohama!"

"For the sake of a few measly strange places!" protested Adela. "You can see those in other ways! And you can do millions of more interesting things—on dry land."

Anthony was somewhat dashed and disappointed at her lack of enthusiasm for a life on the ocean wave.

"Women always want to keep a fellow at home. Nobody would ever do anything except clerk in a grocery if they had their way."

"Nasty thing!" exclaimed Adela with indignation. "Do you want to leave your father and mother and —everything?"

"Well, a fellow has to do something. I suppose you'd feel the same way about West Point?"

"No, I wouldn't. How do you know how I'd feel? But what's the use of being a soldier when there aren't any wars?" she argued. "And it would be worse if there were wars."

"Oh, yes!" this with mocking truculence. "I'll get a safe little job in Klein's grocery—or in Waldman's tailor shop and press the pants of Little Rapids."

Adela burst into gales of laughter and the discussion was adjourned until the next time.

There were similar discussions bearing upon medicine and law and engineering. This last profession, however, was only weakly touched upon—because of Anthony's distaste for mathematics.

"I'll tell you what, Adela," he came lounging to her porch one afternoon. He was obviously laboring under an inspiration. "I've got it! I know what I am going to do. I've decided. I'm not going to study for anything at all! Why tie myself to any one thing, like the army, or navy, or law or medicine? The great thing is to go to some big college first. Get a general, all-round education. Then you're fit for anything. That's what all the big men have done. If you read their biographies — I've been reading some of them. Look at Alexander Hamilton—look at Webster—look at Teddy Roosevelt! That's the game, eh, Adela?"

"But Hamilton and Webster—didn't they know law?"

"Oh, I suppose so. Everybody knows law. I mean everybody ought to know law. Easy enough to learn law. You begin with Blackstone," he elucidated. "I'll ask Dad to get me Blackstone—at once. Probably Jim Howard's got one. I'll borrow it and begin right now."

"Oh, that's scrumptious!" Adela cried with admiration. "I'll get a Blackstone, too, out of the library. Then we can talk about it."

"Yes," said Anthony, tolerantly. "Not a bad idea, Addie." Suddenly he chuckled.

"What's the matter, Tony?"

"Why," said Anthony, with the air of a discoverer, "we've forgotten the diplomatic service."

"Oh, of course!" and Adela clapped her hands. "And you're so good at French and German."

"Yes" — nonchalantly — "those things are rather easy to me."

"Isn't it simply wonderful how many things you can do!" marvelled Adela, in an ecstasy of admiration. "Oh, how I wish I were a boy! What can a girl do?"

Anthony was moved from the sublime contemplation of his powers to give a moment's attention to Adela's case. It was only fair.

"Shucks," he said. "There are plenty enough things a girl can do. Look at your drawing! Why should you not be an artist? Do you know how much some of them get for a picture?" Adela shook her head. "Five hundred and even a thousand dollars is nothing for 'em to get for one picture. That's poor—isn't it?"

"Oh, if I only could!" she murmured wistfully.

"What's the reason you can't?" he demanded with a certain ferocity. "Look at Rosa Bonheur—look at— all the others," he concluded lamely.

"I suppose I can scratch a little—but you've got to learn color—it takes years and years—but look at all the things you can do. Be a Statesman—a Diplomat—be Great. Oh, Anthony, aren't you glad you are not going to West Point or Annapolis?"

Anthony nodded his agreement, and both felt that he had narrowly escaped misdirecting his genius.

It was at about this time that Anthony made up his mind that he was going not to the State University but to Harvard. Those talks with Adela and occasionally with his mother, the gropings which amounted to little more than turning the pages of the books at Jim Howard's, advanced his decision rapidly. He sent for catalogues to Harvard, Yale and Princeton, but from the first Harvard was the university to which he was drawn.

"Look at the language and literary courses they offer a fellow—and the psychology and history—everything!"

He could not see why every holder of a Harvard degree should not be a light of genius—an Admirable Crichton, a finished and accomplished man of the world.

"It's perfectly grand!" sighed Adela. "I wish I could go there."

"I wish you could," he said without enthusiasm. He was too absorbed to treat that yearning for the impossible seriously. Girls were always wishing for things beyond their reach.

What he could not understand, however, was that Arthur Clark should not also take fire at the idea of going to Harvard.

"My dad couldn't afford to send me there," Arthur protested mildly. "I'll have to go to the State University if I go at all."

"Neither can my dad afford it," retorted Anthony emphatically. "But I'll go there just the same—if I have to work my way. Nothing can stop me." As this was said in the presence of Adela, he realized that he had committed himself irrevocably. The glow of admiration in Adela's eyes made a retreat from his position impossible.

When Anthony sounded his father upon his new decision, his father smiled.

"Is that the Simon-pure and only genuine latest plan, son?"

"Yes, dad. That's what I really want to do."

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